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THE MEANING OF PRAYER

By REV. JOHN BIGHAM, Ph.D.

[HARVARD]

Professor of Philosophy, De Pauw University, Greencastle, Ind.

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Art. II.—THE MEANING OF PRAYER.

All men are in their way theologians. Everyone has some deity at whose shrine he bows in prayer. It may be a false god, a deified ancestor whose failings are hid by a halo of reverence, or even the sun, moon, stars, or other natural objects and forces. It may be the true God, whose unseen power is manifested in righteousness and benevolence. The fact of prayer, of adoration to some deity, true or false, is a significant phase of human history and life.

A glance at the religious history of the world shows the universality of prayer. In ancient India over two thousand years ago petitions were chanted by the Vedic priests—hymns of propitiation to Indra, the sky god; of thanks to Agni, the fire god; of fear to Varuna, the great destroyer; and tenderly beautiful supplications to Yama, the god of death. The temples of old Egypt, dedicated to Osiris, god of the dead; to Amen, giver of victory; to Ra, the sun god; and to Ptah, the creator, resounded with entreaties to their patron deities. In the Western world the Aztecs in ancient Mexico brought tribute and human sacrifice to Mexitli and to Quetzalcoatl, god of benevolence. From the altars of classic Greece incense arose through many centuries to Athene, the wise; Zeus, the thunderer; Poseidon, the sea god; Apollo, the princely healer; and Aphrodite, the foam-born beauty; and votive offerings enriched the shrines of the oracles of Delphi, Lesbos, and Dodona. The Romans, with all their genius and endurance, owed their conquests as much to prayer as to warfare. They had their Lares and Penates, gods of the home and family; Vesta, goddess of the quenchless hearth fire; Trivia, goddess of the streets; Jove and Juno, Mars and Venus, Neptune, Pluto, and Bacchus; naiads and nymphs, fauns and satyrs; a deity for every place and condition, to which the devout Romans offered fervent and frequent prayer. Our nearer ancestors, the ancient Saxons and Norsemen, held communion with the mighty Thor, ruler of storms and thunder; with the gentle and beautiful Balder, god of summer; with Frey, giver of rain and harvests and peace; and with Odin, the great all-father. And savage tribes, Indians of America, idolatrous blacks of Central Africa, fetich worshipers

of the sea islands, these and all other peoples have gods to which they offer a sincere but benighted adoration. And the true God has never lacked worshipers. The Hebrews, with clearer insight than their polytheistic neighbors in Chaldea, Assyria, and Egypt, prayed to him as El Shaddai the mighty; as Elohim Sebaoth, God of the hosts of heaven and earth; as Jehovah, the living one. And the petitions spoken with incense and sacrifice at the altars of Israel yielded at last to the purer prayers of the early Christians, to spiritual communion with the great Comforter. Thus in prayer the Church was founded by Christ and extended by Paul and his brethren. In prayer its missions were spread from India to Britain. In prayer the martyrs died in the arena. In prayer the Church councils were held. In prayer battles have been fought and nations founded. In prayer Luther established Protestantism, Columbus claimed the New World for Spain and the Church, and the Huguenots and Puritans sought the freer life of the Western world.

Prayers rise incessantly in the daily life of the world. Today, as in ancient times, the Brahman priests supplicate hideous idols, and Buddhists in Japan tie their paper petitions to the lattice screens at the shrines of the great Gautama. Many times daily the muezzin calls the faithful of Islam to prayers, and many millions of worshipers still bow before gods of metal, wood, and stone. In Christian nations prayer is offered in public meetings and on national occasions. Congress and legislatures have their chaplains and services. In educational institutions prayer has a permanent place. Universities, colleges, academies, and some public schools have stated times for it. In the religious world it is a vital part of the regular services, Sabbath school, official and social meetings, and is peculiarly prominent in the weekly prayer meetings. It enters into domestic life, as family prayers or as the blessing at meals, and is part of the personal experience of all believers.

A fact so prevalent in the history and life of the world must command the attention and interest of every thoughtful mind. It seems a just claim that everyone, whether a Christian or not, should have an intelligent understanding of the meaning of prayer. All prayers are petitions from a worshiper to a deity. In the church services the minister says, "Let us unite in prayer." The worshipers then kneel, or stand, or bow their

heads. All eyes are closed. The preacher, in a similar attitude, with clasped hands, leads them in prayer. In subdued tones, which may sometimes tremble with emotion or rise in throbs of supplication or melt in fervent thanksgiving, he talks to this invisible and inaudible Being, which he addresses as "God," or "Lord," or "Our Father in heaven," or "Almighty God." His words guide the thoughts of the listening people. He prays for the "sick and afflicted," for "those weak in the faith," for the unconverted, for all good causes, such as the Church, Christian temperance, Christian education, and missions. He confesses and asks forgiveness for the sins of his people and of the world. After speaking thus for a short time he ascribes holiness, glory, and power to this supreme Being, and says, "All this we ask in Christ's name," or merely uses the phrase "for Christ's sake," and then closes with the word "Amen," a Hebrew adverb meaning "firmly," "certainly," "so be it." Then the congregation resume the ordinary position in the pews, and the service proceeds. An act so unique as this communion of a sinful human being with an infinitely holy Deity suggests various queries which may perhaps be answered by scrutinizing prayer from several points of view:

I. The psychological. The act of prayer is the culmination of normal mental conditions. One who prays does so because he cannot help it. He is in mental distress which demands relief. Into that desert land of the self, where each of us dwells in loneliness, has suddenly flashed a revelation of weakness, selfishness, and guilt; and far away on the heights of consciousness the dweller sees a splendor of unattained possibilities. And toiling toward this transfiguration of his latent powers his futile struggles declare his need of One who, knowing infinitely better than he the hidden dangers of the psychic wilderness, can guide him aright. This Guide can be no other than the supreme mind, God. For all other finite minds are making the same weary journey. Prayer, therefore, is the spontaneous yearning for the Companion. And, as the brilliant and genial Professor James aptly says, "The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that, whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a self of the social sort, it yet can find its only adequate Socius in an ideal world." * Thus, in

* *Psychology*, p. 192. New York, 1892.

prayer, the petitioner communes with the ideal Self whose holiness he vainly strives to realize. His sorrows and longings are understood, and his burdens are lightened, because his secrets are known, by an infinitely compassionate Friend.

The act of prayer involves some definite and important psychic processes. The habit of prayer is an advantage and a danger. Habitual prayer is easier, and by care and accompanying works may become a controlling power in every life. But it is liable to degenerate into a subconscious routine, like eating and walking, and its efficacy is thereby endangered. The mind that would commune with its Companion must be properly secluded. The quiet Sabbath, free from the turmoil of business; the evening hour, after the cares of the day; the sanctuary, from whose dim light all harsh sounds and sights are excluded; the worshiper's closed eyes and subdued tones are requisites for shielding the spirit from the disturbances of sense. In true prayer the attention must be directed to God. Thus, only by effort can there be access to the divine consciousness. Grouping its petitions around some definite need, daily noticing new beauty in the changes of Christian experience, finding the shock of disappointment only a stimulus to closer scrutiny of failings and possibilities, all valid prayer requires voluntary attention. Those who pray are led to greater delicacy of moral discrimination. The holiness and sin, the gold and dross, the slime and cleanness in others and in himself, stand out in their true proportions and vividness when seen through the correcting transparency of prayer. Viewed through its achromatic purity, the pomp and glory of the world vanish, its colors fade, its great dwindle, mammon's jewels become baubles and its robes tatters, Rome is a wilderness and Nazareth an empire, Cæsar a servant and Paul dictator, and the despised Galilean is King of kings. The last is first and the first last, death is life, prosperity is doom, the tipsy world grows sober, and superficial contrasts disappear when by prayer we discern amid life's seeming chaos the dominant purpose of the great Judge who judges all things well. In prayer the scope of this purpose is revealed. By the silent, swift bonds of association the remotest and minutest objects and events are united into a spiritual system wherein the meaning of the world is more clearly seen. In suggestive influence

upon a wavering mind a dewdrop may outweigh the ocean; a casual greeting may do more than a learned dissertation; a name, a touch, a familiar refrain may reach the hidden springs of life. The wings of lowly faith sweep in association from India to China, Africa, Armenia; from Rome to Ephesus; from David to Christ; from doubt to faith; from Calvary's cross to the heavenly throne, and take many a refreshing journey in the realms of spirit. Memory, too, darkens or chastens the present with recollections of past failures or blessings. Imagination secures through prayer an insight into the ideal world. It shows us the gates of pearl, the precious streets, and jeweled corridors leading to the great white throne. It sees there the ineffable radiance of the thorn-crowned King, the chanting choirs of cherubim and seraphim, and the adoration of the white-robed kneeling throngs of the redeemed. And, borne on their melodious hosannas, it transports us away from all the crudity of earthly longings.

Further, all prayer is rational, an intelligent and normal act. By reason we pass from the things seen, which are temporal, to the things unseen, which are eternal; and the concrete world of houses and trees, books and furniture, men, weather, sky, earth, stars, universities, battles, debates, newspapers, and money, resolves into a few simple facts and principles—a holy God and a sinful soul; after sin, forgiveness or condemnation; after life, death; after death, judgment; after judgment, heaven or hell—and these are the essentials of life. Obscured in ordinary living, they stand clearly revealed in prayer. The emotional nature is preeminent in prayer. Throbs of remorse for sin, gratitude at forgiveness, grief and reverence, fear and entreaty; anger, doubt, and despair; wonder, awe, and peace; the exultation of Miriam's triumphant song, Elijah's thanksgiving for rain, David's penitence, Simeon's rejoicing, Christ's agony in Gethsemane, and over all the love that passeth understanding—all these find a true and necessary place in communion with the living God. The deepest psychological significance of prayer is its volitional nature. The bended knee, bowed head, and clasped hands fitly express the submissive will, which has listened to the inner voice, has deliberately chosen God, has renounced self, and has determined upon a new life. Thus it was that the

publican cried, "God be merciful to me a sinner;" and the persecutor on the Damascus road, in his crushed zeal and broken purpose, asked, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" And the volitional element in prayer is consummated by the "Amen" of consent, the fiat of the worshiper.

II. The metaphysical. A psychological analysis of prayer is inadequate. Psychology at best is only a natural science, and—like chemistry, with its atomic theory, astronomy, with its nebular hypothesis, and all other natural sciences—it rests upon unproven assumptions, and all its explanations are provisional. A clearer understanding of prayer requires the aid of metaphysics, which defines it as a special relation between the absolute and the finite spirit. The nature, method, and results of this relation may be determined, as involving the categories of personality, being, and relation. The relation of the worshiper to God in prayer is the "second personal" relation of communion or direct address. As a scientist the theologian studies about God, as a worshiper he is acquainted with him. The fact of prayer presupposes that the same essential nature is characteristic of deity and worshiper. The Universal and the particular are therefore spirits whose reciprocity of life is the choice of both, and the fulfillment of the conditions which make prayer valid is the duty of the suppliant. The method whereby the particular secures audience with the Universal is peculiar. The two are radically distinct—finite and infinite, creature and Creator, sinful and holy, ignorance and omniscience, weakness and omnipotence, limitation and absoluteness, human and divine. Prayer bridges this dualism by a third element possessing the essence of both Absolute and conditioned. This mediation must be the Universal particularized, the absolute idea uttered in a finite form, the eternal Logos incarnate, the servant of Jehovah, Jesus the Christ. In his name only and for his sake alone can the soul have access to God, and there is no other name under heaven whereby prayer can have validity. The phrase "for Christ's sake" is necessary in all effectual prayer, and has a clear metaphysical authority. The beauty of prayer is further shown in its results, in the insight so gained into the life of both the conditioned and the Absolute. This knowledge is more extensive and reliable than any other. All physical science is neces-

sarily "through a glass, darkly." Mental sciences are more accurate in that the observer is "face to face" with his psychic specimens. But in both departments the knowledge has two limitations—the observer is fallible, and the mental and physical specimens are inadequate revelations of reality and are studied under necessarily defective conditions of experimentation. But, in prayer, that unique attitude of the particular to the Universal, there is only one limitation to knowledge—the worshiper. The revelations of the Absolute in prayer are more direct and extensive than in the ordinary mental life or in the cosmos, and, if made at all, are wholly sincere. The finite spirit, illumined by the shekinah of the unconditioned, sees painfully its own most secret faults; and he who prays in humble faith can thereby view the unveiled glory of reality, forever hidden from the intellectual scrutiny of him who studies but prays not. The action of the religious consciousness in prayer is the metaphysical acme of cognition. It yields to ontology and epistemology their most precious data.

III. The theological. The divine participation in prayer is more important than the human. A thorough understanding of prayer can be found, not in a description of its mental accompaniments, nor in an analysis of its basal principles, but only through theology, which—being the interpretation of the divine life as revealed in the facts of the religious consciousness of man in history, in the cosmos, and in Christ—is the most accurate, comprehensive, and important of all the sciences. Thoughtful minds may have difficulty in harmonizing prayer with the attributes of God. It seems to contradict his omniscience. Is not prayer, they suggest, absurd in relation to an omniscient spirit? If he knows us infinitely better than we do ourselves, is it not a farce, they ask, to tell him the sins we commit, the longings we have, the gladness we feel? Some prayers, doubtless many, do undertake this ridiculous task of tutoring God. But prayer should not attempt to add to that life in which there are no shadows of ignorance, no fluctuations of passion, no maelstroms of doubt. In act, word, and thought we do indeed express what is eternally known to him; but thus only can a relationship to him be established which is not intellectual but volitional. Prayer is a communion, not a recitation; companionship, not coercion; petition

with compliance or refusal, not question with answer or silence. Conditioned by faith, it presupposes our receptivity, obedience, and cooperation, recognizes God's perfections and sovereignty, and acknowledges in him the solution of all life's puzzles.

A greater difficulty is to reconcile prayer with God's omnipotence. His eternal purpose is to reveal himself through an orderly system of finite spirits, objects, and events. Does prayer disturb this revelation and alter the course of events? If this purpose should require a rainstorm, an earthquake, the ruin of a nation, the success of a battle, the death of a loved one, the salvation of one of our friends and the damnation of another, can our prayers prevent these occurrences? When President Garfield was shot, the Christian world agonized in prayer for his recovery; but he died. What good did all this praying do? Such queries may be answered by distinguishing the principles of the divine character from their revelation in objects and events. God is almighty. But he is not an almighty brute, or machine, or lunatic. He is an omnipotent person whose life, being regulated by reason, is one of infinite love. The principles of that life are unalterable. If all the Christians of all ages should unite in prayer to change a principle of the divine character, the petition would be unheeded. The eternal reason cannot be absurd. He cannot deny himself. But the revelation of reason in concrete events is not unalterable. The fact of prayer, and of its influence upon events, is presupposed in the system of finite spirits constituting the kingdom of God. Prayers are dynamic. They cannot change God's eternal purpose. But they do influence the manifestation of that purpose in the cosmos and in history. Hence the "accepted prayer" of faith commits itself to God in complete confidence that it will be disposed of in wise accord with his ultimate purpose.

But can prayer be reconciled with foreordination? If our friend's damnation is predetermined from all eternity, why commit the absurdity of praying for his salvation? We do so pray because such events are not foreordained. God is responsible for, and does foreordain certain elements in, all objects and events. The cosmos, the moral system, our own powers are predetermined. But the use of these powers, our sins and consequent damnation, we alone control. God's knowledge and power are not limited. His responsibility is. He is not responsible

for sin or for righteousness, but only for the freedom whose expression they are. And that this expression—either the unselfish choice of God as the supreme object of love, or the sinful choice of self as that object—is completely within our control is overwhelmingly proven by the testimony of consciousness. The remorse and penitence of the millions who have found peace only in prayer to a forgiving God; the lives of the martyrs, of Luther, Bunyan, and Jerry McAuley, are convincing proof that our destiny is in our own power. Consciousness, the soul's impartial tribunal, pronounces its sentence, not upon an innocent deity, but upon the deliberately criminal self.

Prayer is connected with the origin and continuance of the Christian life. It is potent in conversion and in Christian culture. Prayer "without ceasing" is the unbroken sequence of a Christian's acts and thoughts. Time and place are nonessentials. If business men prayed over their counters, farmers in their dairies, mechanics at the lathes, and cooks in the kitchen; if students in class rooms used swift, brief, silent prayers instead of sly peeps into text-books; if prayer were offered steadily and silently, not merely at church or at night and morning, but everywhere, on the streets, in stores, on railway trains, the world would be better. There would be more answers to prayer. One who prays thus secretly, not thrice but a hundred times a day—thirty-six thousand five hundred prayers a year, short ones—will be surprised to see the delicate touch of God in the details of life. And prayer is not merely language, or thought, or action. "Prayer" is ordinarily pronounced as a monosyllable, like "there," "where," "care." But the word is a dissyllable. The stem is "pray;" and the suffix *er*, like the Latin *or* in *orator*, and the Greek ωρ in ῥήτωρ, means actor or agent. A pray-er is one who prays. The Christian is himself a pray-er; and the Christian civilization which, despite its depreciation by skeptics and its competition with baser creeds, is enhancing every phase of life, is the modern world's sterling tribute to the Pray-er of pray-ers.

John Bigham.

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